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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the possible relationship between level of service to students with behavioral disorders and: restrictiveness of State Department of Education positions on interpretation of the definition of serious emotional disturbance, of the social maladjustment exclusion in that definition, and a state's degree of republicanism. The study, which involved a review of states' voting records and a survey of 48 state and territorial directors of special education, found that the majority of respondents preferred the least restrictive interpretation of the definition of serious emotional disturbances and the most restrictive interpretation of the social maladjustment exclusion. Interpretation of definition and republicanism had positive correlations with behavioral disorders service level. (18 references) (Author/PB)

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A Search for Variables Affecting Under-identification of Students with Behavioral Disorders: II

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Abstract

A number of variables have been suggested that may contribute to under-identification (relative to prevalence estimates) of students with behavioral disorders. Several of these variables were investigated in a study preceding the present study. This study investigated the possible relationship of the restrictiveness of state department of education positions on interpretation of the definition of serious emotional disturbance, of the social maladjustment exclusion in that definition, and a state's degree of Republicanism with level of service to students with behavioral disorders. Two of the variables investigated were found to have positive correlations with the criterion variable. One of the findings was in the expected direction and the other was in the direction opposite expectations. Implications of the findings from this investigation and possible explanations for them are discussed.

A Search for Variables Affecting Under-identification of Behaviorally Disordered Students: II

The term "behavior disorder" will be used in this paper instead of the P.L. 94-142 term "serious emotional disturbance" and is used in its generic sense. That is, the term includes all disturbed students regardless of what particular label a given state may use for its population of school-age children and youth with serious behavior problems.

Of the three largest handicapped student populations, only services for behavior disordered students fall significantly below the official prevalence estimate. The estimated prevalence of students with behavioral disorders is 2% of the school-age population (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1979). Currently, the portion of the school-age population receiving special education services for behavioral disorders is about .91% (Division of Educational Services, 1987). Analysis of service trends (Algozzine & Korinek, 1985) show services increasing modestly for behavior disordered students,

declining modestly for mentally retarded students and increasing rapidly for learning disabled students (Chalfant, 1985). Prevalence and service figures for the mentally retarded are not significantly different, service level significantly exceeds estimated prevalence for learning disabilities, and estimated prevalence significantly exceeds service level for behavioral disorders.

It is widely thought that the official 2% prevalence estimate is too conservative (Center, 1989a; Kauffman, 1985). Alternative estimates of prevalence suggest a much larger population. Bower (1981), who wrote the definition adopted for use in implementing P.L. 94-142, conducted a study that suggested 10% of the school-age population would meet his definition. In another study (Rubin & Balow, 1978), 7.4% of the students studied were judged, by at least three different teachers, to have a behavior problem. Kauffman (1985) indicated that, in his opinion, most of the students identified in the Rubin and Balow study would meet the criteria in the federal definition. Thus, it appears that the number of behavior disordered students has probably been under-estimated and even that

projected population is under-identified and under-served. Since this appears to be the only handicapped population being grossly under-identified and under-served, the question "why?" naturally arises.

In a recent study, Center and Obringer (1987) discussed the problem of under-identification of students with behavior disorders (BD). Center and Obringer investigated several variables suggested in the professional literature as possibly affecting under-identification of BD students. The variables investigated included misplacement of BD students in LD programs (Chalfant, 1985), large minority enrollments (Long, 1983), and low per pupil expenditures for education (Long, 1983). None of the variables investigated were found to be significantly different for high service states in contrast to low service states.

Center (1985) and Center and Obringer (1987) suggested under-identification might be related to the restrictiveness of a state's interpretation of the definition of serious emotional disturbance used for P.L. 94-142. The more restrictive the interpretation

the greater the potential number of students that can be excluded from service. Paul (1985) has discussed the rise of conservative political ideology, in recent years, and its opposition to social service programs. Paul suggested that a Republican administration in Washington is evidence for both trends. He further suggested that Republican opposition to social service programs might have an adverse influence on states' identification of BD students. Paul suggested that services for BD students would be the most likely to be affected by strong Republican sentiment. His reasoning was that among lay persons and particularly conservatives behavior/emotional problems are, for the most part, viewed as an individual's own fault; i.e., one could choose to be otherwise if one wished.

The present study investigated the influence of the restrictiveness of a state's position on interpretation of the federal definition of serious emotional disturbance, meaning of the social maladjustment exclusion in that definition, and a state's level of Republicanism on level of special education services for BD students. In this study, a restrictive position is one which, in the authors' opinion, is more likely to

result in exclusion of potential students from service than is some other position. The research hypothesis was that the restrictiveness of a state's positions and the degree of its Republicanism are related to the level of service in the state for BD students. There has also been an ongoing debate over the label, serious emotional disturbance, used in P.L. 94-142 (Huntze, 1985). Therefore, a secondary objective in this study was to obtain some data on that issue.

Method

To test the research hypothesis, data on service levels for behavioral disorders were obtained from the Seventh Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of Public Law 94-142 (Division of Educational Services, 1985). The data presented in this report are based on statistical data provided by each state on the number of children between the ages of 6 and 17 ruled eligible and provided with special education services by that state. Data from this report were judged the most appropriate because it is the most recent report following a presidential election for which voting data are available. Furthermore, there had been a Republican

administration in Washington for four years, which should be enough time for its attitudes to have affected the actions of their supporters in the various states. A survey was also conducted of state directors of special education. The survey identified each state's position on label, SED definition, and meaning of social maladjustment. When a state had no official position, the respondent was asked for his or her opinion on an issue. The reasoning was that state directors are in a position that allows them to significantly influence both official and unofficial policy through their opinions. Finally, an index of a state's Republicanism was developed. This index was selected from several suggested indices (Mason, 1986) and was based on votes by party in elections at three levels of government.

The survey asked state directors of special education if they favored a change in the label used for students with serious emotional disturbance and if so what label they preferred. The state directors were also asked to choose from three interpretations of the federal definition of serious emotional disturbance, and of the social maladjustment exclusion in that definition. The option was available for each

respondent to make a written response if the choices provided were not judged appropriate. The three choices in the last two items were constructed to reflect the authors' judgment of three different levels of restrictiveness (high, intermediate, and low). A restrictive position is one that would tend to limit the size of a potential service population.

The item concerning interpretation of the definition focused on the following wording in the definition, "The term means a condition...." Interpretation of the definition hinges on this wording (Center, 1985, 1989b, 1990). The choices offered, in descending order of restrictiveness were as follows.

1. The term means an <u>emotional</u> condition...(where "emotional" is intended to apply only to disturbed thoughts and feelings and in particular those problems involving anxiety states).

This choice is the most restrictive interpretation because it would exclude the largest group of students exhibiting problems in public school programs.

2. The term means a <u>behavioral</u> condition...(where "behavioral" is intended to apply only to externalized,

overt, and observable problems in social behavior).
This choice is a less restrictive interpretation because it would exclude the smallest group of students exhibiting problems in public school programs; i.e., those described in (1) above.

3. The term means <u>any</u> condition...(where "any" is intended to apply to all types of psychopathological behavior, e.g., affective, cognitive, social, etc.).
This choice is the least restrictive interpretation because it would be inclusive of both choices 1 and 2 and has the least potential for excluding students from services.

The item concerning interpretation of the social maladjustment exclusion in the definition focused on several possible interpretations of what was meant by social maladjustment (Center 1989b, 1990). The choices offered, in descending order of restrictiveness, were as follows.

1. Social maladjustment means students who exhibit antisocial behavior that is due to a failure of the socialization process.
This is the most restrictive interpretation because it could be applied to most students exhibiting antisocial

behavior and would allow exclusion of the largest number of students.

2. Social maladjustment means students who exhibit antisocial behavior that is due to socialization within a subculture where the behavior exhibited is acceptable. This is a less restrictive interpretation because it would exclude only those students whose antisocial behavior can be attributed to socialized delinquency.

3. Social maladjustment means students who are psychiatrically normal but who exhibit problems as a result of finding themselves in an unfamiliar culture or have conflicting loyalties to two cultures.

This is the least restrictive interpretation because it would exclude the smallest group of students. Exclusion would be limited to those who have been acculturated in a different culture and are having difficulty adapting to the mainstream American culture, e.g., immigrants and refugees.

The choices were assigned ratings of one, two, or three going from most to least restrictive. Only a few respondents exercised the option to make a written response. Written responses were evaluated by the

authors and assigned a rating, by consensus, using the same scale.

The index developed for Republicanism was each state's Republican voting record. Voting in three types of elections were used to construct the index. The voting records used for the index were each state's 1) Republican vote for president in 1984, 2) for U.S. Congressional candidates, and 3) for representatives to state legislatures in the years immediately preceding 1984 and in that year's elections. These data were obtained from the Statistical Abstracts of the United States (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1987). The selection of Republican voting record as an index was made because it was judged the index most directly related to the suggestion of Paul (1986). The reasoning behind the index was that the more political party conformity there is between the political administration in Washington and a state's voting support for that administration's party the more likely is an influence by that administration on social policy in the state.

Results

A total of 48 states and U.S. territories responded to the survey. All responses to item one in the survey

were usable and 47 responses to items two and three were usable. On the item concerning a change in the P.L. 94-142 label, 45.8% did not favor a change in the label, 37.5% did favor a change in the label, and 16.7% were undecided. Of those favoring a change in the label, seventy-two percent favored the label "behavior disordered."

The percent of respondents selecting each of the three positions for the two interpretation items were as follows.

Item two, interpretation of the definition:

Choice #1: 14.89%

Choice #2: 12.77%

Choice #3: 72.34%

Item three, interpretation of the social maladjustment exclusion:

Choice #1: 53.19%

Choice #2: 14.89%

Choice #3: 32.92%

The data available allowed the Republicanism index to be constructed for states but not U.S. territories. Therefore, the number of respondents on whom data for

all variables were available dropped to 43 when the index values were added to the data. A step-wise, multiple regression analysis was run on these data (Anderson, 1986). Restrictiveness of position on definition and social maladjustment, and Republicanism were run against state service level for BD as the criterion variable. The F value for P = .05 was the criterion for removal of a variable from the analysis. The F value for the analysis was 7.7893 and the P value was P < .002. The obtained R was .5294 and R-Squared was .2803. The final step in the analysis retained two variables. One was the definition variable, r = .28 with service level (P < .060) which would account for 6.52% of the variance. The second variable was Republicanism, r = .464 with service level (P < .002) which would account for 20.2% of the variance.

Discussion

Opinion on the label issue was fairly evenly divided with the undecided having the weight to make either the change or no change position the majority position. Clearly, the majority of those desiring a change (72%) favored the alternative label "behavioral disorder." The majority of state directors of special

education chose the least restrictive interpretation of the definition and the most restrictive interpretation of the social maladjustment exclusion. This seems puzzling because one position would allow inclusion of the largest number of students, while the other position would exclude the largest number of students. In fact, the net effect would seem to be the creation of a highly restrictive definition. The most restrictive interpretation of the exclusion would, for the most part, limit the definition to students with "an emotional condition," which was the first, and most restrictive, choice offered for the interpretation of the definition item. Perhaps the intent was to only give the appearance of favoring a non-restrictive definition. On the other hand this anomalous pair of choices may have been due to a failure to fully consider the implications of the two interpretations selected. However, a third of the state directors chose the least restrictive interpretation of both the definition and the exclusion which is the type of choice relationship one would expect.

Both interpretation of definition and Republicanism

had positive correlations with BD service level. As interpretation of the definition became less strict, BD service level went up. While this relationship was in the expected direction, it was a weak relationship. As Republicanism became stronger, BD service level also went up. This relationship was moderate but much stronger than the one for interpretation of definition. It was also the reverse of what was expected.

The suggestion by Center (1985) and Center and Obringer (1987) received mild support from this study. Given the weak correlation and the small amount of variance accounted for by the interpretation of definition variable, this is probably not a major contributor to the variability (.03% to 3.09%) in BD service level among the states. It does suggest, however, that some states may be deliberately or incidentally holding down their level of service to BD students by the way they choose to interpret the P.L. 94-142 definition.

The suggestion of Paul (1985) received no support from this study. While the suggestion appears to have face validity, the data do not support it. That is, Republicanism appears to be associated with higher

levels of service to BD students. The study offers no explanation for this unexpected finding. One possible explanation is that states with strong Republican sentiment respond more favorably to services for handicapped students as an image management strategy. That is, Republicans are commonly believed to oppose social service programs. If Republicans, at the state level, wanted to pacify their critics on the social service issue, this might be a way to do so without overly antagonizing their supporters who oppose social services. In other words, it is possible that educational services for handicapped children, of the various social service programs, is the least likely to be opposed by any large segment of a state's voting population.

It would be of interest to know if the relationship found between Republicanism and higher levels of service to BD students exists along with a negative relationship between Republicanism and support for other social programs. If such an association was found, it would lend support to the image management hypothesis suggested above. Of course, there exists the

possibility that Republicanism is associated with some unidentified variable which influences higher service levels for BD students.

The weak positive finding for the interpretation of definition variable suggests that this variable might be worth further investigation. Perhaps a better test of the restrictiveness of interpretation variable would be an examination, state-by-state, of eligibility criteria for BD services. Eligibility criteria would provide a more direct assessment of restrictiveness than the survey method used in this investigation. Assuming such an investigation revealed that restrictiveness of interpretation has a stronger association with low BD service level, the underlying reason for restrictive interpretation would still need to be identified. The underlying reason may be social policy, but it appears unlikely that Republicanism is strongly related to such social policy.

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